

## Cricket at Boya North Waziristan

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Boya is a small town almost 15 miles west of MiranShah and equal distance away from Durand Line the international border between Pakistan & Afghanistan. British made an inroad into the militant tribal land of Wazirs in 1895 by raising the Tochi Corps of Levies. The very first Victoria Cross ever bestowed upon a native militia {North Waziristan Militia} was awarded in 1915 to Captain Eustace Jotham at Spina Khisora Post few miles further west of Boya. Presently Boya is a hub of Taliban, it is inhabited by the Daur and Wazir tribes. The Taliban leader Gul Bahadur have his headquarters at Degan almost five miles west of Boya. In June 2012, I was lucky to stay at Boya as guest of Tochi Scouts which have a fort here. The fort was built in 1907.

Cricket has gain a very strong foothold among the tribesmen in recent years something which the British could not do in half a century has been achieved in last two decades thanks mainly to satellite receivers and the fact that Pakistan won the 1992 cricket world cup as well. Boya is the forward most post of Tochi Scouts almost twenty miles short of Durand Line. There are two cricket grounds in Boya, there may be many others but these two are most prominent, one is out side the safety perimeters and is played on the helipad the other being inside the fort's outer cordon. It is a cement pitch with one end the western end is having the fort wall acting as wicket keeper. On 15<sup>th</sup> & 16<sup>th</sup> June 2012, I witnessed cricket matches here. Three teams were composed one named as Tochi Scouts No 5 Wing team other known as Tehsildar Team [civil administration] and third the army team. These three teams represent the three power players of the area the only one missing is the fourth player the Talibans who play outside the wall.

At 1730 hours when sun is still bit high the players starts coming on to the field but normally it start after the Asr Prayers. Players with beard and wearing shalwar and kameez and carrying bat and balls is a unique experience to feel. In normal environments there is not much of difference between these players and the one out side but on any given day they both would cut each other down without any remorse but when ever the ball goes out of outer boundary wall it is customary for the passing by Taliban's to throw the ball inside with a smile.

Normal game is of either nine overs or at the most of twelve overs with each bowler allowed to ball a maximum of two overs with an exception of one bowling three overs. There is a

wicket keeper and runs can be scored mostly in front. If the ball goes inside the fort wall mainly due to a snick two runs are awarded and if it goes out than a six is called for. Runs on over throw are allowed but batsman has to change ends at the end of every over as only side of pitch is used for batting. The wickets are three iron rods welded together and held firmly with bricks.

Players range from the commander of the fort, clerks, cooks, signallers, sweepers and even religious teacher. The teams are composed of the army soldiers who other wise have a cold relations with Scouts but it is only through cricket that ice is broken. On 16<sup>th</sup> June match, the two teams were the scouts led by Captain Immad and the Tehsiladr 's team which was led by the clerk Shaista Gul. There were nine players a side, the few spectators sat on one side few occupied the fort wall and the sentry posts over looking the road and adjoining village also position themselves in a way that they can perform both tasks comfortably. A signaller started performing the role of scorer and commentator. Tehsil team batted first openers were the cook and the sweeper who held the wicket , scores briskly and then wickets started falling on regular basis, fielding was exceptional and almost all high catches were held. Twice ball went out of the wall, mid way the game was stopped to perform the prayers and after that all sat including the religious teacher who has been nominated as the coach of the Tehsil's team. The second innings started with a bang the catch being dropped on the very first ball, Captain Immad played a solid innings and the team went to score the required runs of 63 in nine overs without any loss of wicket. The spectators cheered every runs. There is never a silence , constant words of advice from everyone to all players, comments among the spectators on the merit of shots adds spice.

After the game which normally ends with Maghrib prayers , a joint tea break session was hosted which comprised of sweet items prepared by the fort cook.

After watching the game one is bound to contemplate to ponder over the role of cricket in the present war against terror in the frontier region. There is not much of relaxation available and what little is there is scrutinised by the religious teachers and not long ago Cricket was regarded as a kafir game but now it has become an acceptable part of village scene in frontier region. Evening time is the one time when all are relaxed as the day has passed by safely. Even the people who have made plans of attacking the posts at night still care to play cricket. Within the military there are two distinct cultures of Scouts and army and both seldom are on good terms especially at far flung areas such as Boya but cricket help to foster a spirit de corps. Watching the native tribesmen and Taliban playing cricket one is forced to think that nothing is lost and there is something common between these rival groups.

As a fan of cricket I always feel rejuvenated when ever I see natives playing cricket because as long as they are playing it there is a hope of reaching a peaceful settlement of the dispute. Cricket lowers racial and rank structures. It is the only sports in which Muslims play with minority Christians. There are only seven Christians in the Boya Fort and also in the whole Tehsil and they are seldom seen sitting with the Muslims but it is magic of cricket that they are cheered and clapped for, which is a great awakening and milestone by itself.